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NEKUIA: THE INANNA POEMS

by



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A THESIS

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## ABSTRACT

"Nekuia: The Inanna Poems" is a cycle of poems which deal with a mythical theme, the descent of an individual to the underworld. The subject is the goddess Inanna, who was a Sumerian deity of the third millenium B.C.





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anaesthesia

1.

the shaven skull gleams yellow  
black vectors

                    intersect  
                    at point of incision.

she grips the little red book  
as the gowns and masks

                    attack

she is awake

                    straining  
her neck to look

at the doctors                      smiling

and the camera                      jerking

in the sweaty grip of an unseen technician

the scalp's red edges

                    fly  
                                    apart

at the touch of the knife

the room heaves

the masks chatter:

                    these men have reached an agreement  
                    about the contents  
                    of her little yellow skull

a hand reaches in  
to the hole in her head  
almost to the wrist  
jerks out something soft

                    purplish

it is dropped into a silver dish  
held up, first to the lens  
then to the woman's  
face

she smiles as though she recognizes it.





anaesthesia

2.

sleep  
     perform the operation  
     while she  
 sleeps.

she drinks the sweet gas  
 sips it like wine  
 only the lips do not touch  
                     the rim of the glass

this lady left earth  
                             and heaven  
 went down  
 into the pit  
 the road was dark  
 the night  
 she has fallen  
 the sword spins down  
     shrieeks as it meets bone  
 voices of men  
 clicking of metal instruments  
 a hush -

    they have discovered  
     the poems  
     deteriorating in her brainpan  
     like a bag  
     of small, bruised pears.





## I

from  
    the summits  
    of heaven  
she looked into the pit

she was a goddess  
    on the summits  
    of heaven

but her heart was in hell

O Inanna  
on the summits

Your heart in hell!



from a hymn to the worm

1.

the worm that we know  
is a multi-coloured  
self-seeking  
tail sucker.

he dwells in the dark  
of the bowels and heart.

he relies heavily  
on unhappiness and fear  
to get him through his days.

he is the sacrificial animal  
of idiots.

he is crafty:

if you hold a piece of raw meat in front of your lips,  
his pinhead pokes out to sniff it.  
but he will not eat.  
he wants fresh pulsing gut.

the worm that we know  
is a gizzard pecker  
come to peck yours.





from a hymn to the worm

2.

i am the goddess

whose body  
is the temple

of a worm.

is there any way  
to speak

of the invisible  
the nameless malignancy  
made firm  
in the soft, cold flesh  
of the worm

of his water-thin blood

his radiant eyes,  
which glisten like stones  
stuck in his flat head

of the bone in his tongue  
which can bore into  
the great muscle  
of the heart

and of the roots, which twine themselves there?

i have pleaded with the worm  
to leave my insides  
offered tears and burnt grasses  
i have cut off my hair  
and fed him bloody meals  
which i could hardly swallow

but his cold heaviness  
throbs still in my belly  
in the night  
i feel him  
turning and crawling  
when i walk  
i hear only the low humming of the worm





from a hymn to the worm

3.

in the rainbow garden  
i offer myself  
an offering to myself



from a hymn to the worm

4.

if you needed a diet of worms  
you could have

anglearmy  
boll  
cankercaterpillarcottoncut  
earthearorcornear  
fire  
galleyglow  
inch  
leech  
measuring  
pin  
round  
shipsilkspile  
tapetobaccotomatotramatodetussah  
webwirewood

that is,  
worms classified as to

home  
function  
shape  
size  
destructive properties and  
social class.





## II

*You don't tell me what you have found.  
You only tell me what you have lost.*

-Akkadian proverb



the tower

the queen builds a tower  
to heaven

with the skulls  
of unsuccessful suitors.

walls of the skull sweet and moist  
and moist of walls the sweet skull  
of moist sweet skulls and the wall

moist and sweet wall of the skulls  
and sweet of skulls the moist wall  
the wall of skulls sweet and moist









from a hymn to the worm

6.

oh worm  
you bless my dreams  
with the cruelty  
shining  
    in your round black eyes  
you are a single-stringed instrument  
you are elegant  
    as a swan

there are fingerprints on my heart  
they are all yours





*she had a loveliness -*  
*it was said of her*  
*how she carried her beauty*  
*like the rising moonlight*

in the coldest room of the tower  
 she waits, presses  
 dried fruit  
     to her lips  
 what is here  
 for the lady  
     giver of delights?  
 her arms ache to embrace  
 a child,  
 a tree, a young goat

she attends the monthly buzz and shudder  
     of unseen organs  
 the cat peers into the bowl  
 between her white thighs  
 wipes them adoringly  
 with wet noseleather  
 she bends to him  
 he inhales love syllables from her lips

in dreams  
 her friends are all become sick  
 and old  
 they clutch at her robe  
 upon waking  
 she finds  
 two small red  
     holes  
 in her hand

she has not soothed her insides  
 with a man  
 for months

in dreams  
 she feels a warm and dark presence  
 undresses slowly  
 and makes a pale necklace of her arms



she craves the bed of queenship

she craves the bed

her dress is woven of the tongues of cows

she craves the bed

the earth is tied to her foot as a sandal

she craves the bed

the eldest daughter of Sin

she craves the bed

she is a life-giving wild cow

she craves the bed





coming down now full  
from the tower  
just the idea  
lashed to the brain

she set her mind upon below  
set her mind on it  
she set her mind upon below  
down to hell she walked away

walked away down  
the not seen  
she moves as  
ripples in tall grass  
shadows on water  
tall in the land moving  
a green shoot in a dead land  
her heart is piping in the wilderness  
like a bird complaining



## III

she sets forth  
with a darkened face

the always laughing  
always rejoicing maid  
the maid Inanna

how she weeps!

she takes up her clothing  
the perfect stones  
and walks down  
to  
the  
city.





it is afternoon

it is after

he puts out his hand

for the rod

at the gate

that she sees

the first looming

of the dark city

the worm sings to her

rich, slow voice

of the worm

who lives

in the small ruin of her heart



euphorbia splendens

the coldest month  
 moon dangerously swollen  
 in a white sky

grey birds screaming,  
                                   hungry.

he stood framed in the doorway  
 face frozen in glass  
 the heavy wooden  
 mask  
 grinning on his shoulders  
 a rag drawn across the loins  
 go in.

she entered the room  
 paleness  
 of a dry, stripped dogbone  
 voices murmuring  
                   in empty  
                   stone jars  
 something burning  
 in a back room  
 he was wearing a red shirt  
 he was asking if she  
                                   would like  
                                   some coffee.

she stood by  
                   the window  
 rubbing the smooth carved bear  
 the devils clawed at the glass  
 nipples stiffened  
                   in fear  
 fingers wrapped themselves tightly  
                                   around his ten year-old  
                                   crown  
                                   of thorns  
 shugurra,  
 the desert crown  
 taken howling from her head



the blood moved slowly  
out of the small round holes.

his hand holds out the white cup  
they drink together in the smoky room  
quiet.  
it is after  
noon and he is smiling  
and wearing a red shirt

her heart was frozen in hell





have a throat

the throat  
     smeared with sticky salve  
     which burnt  
     blotches into the skin

burned down to the throatbone  
                     the throat *inside* scraped  
 where did she find the bandages  
     -scarves woven from dried weeds and sticks  
     -socks bursting with pickers  
 wound  
     like tourniquets  
 fastened with pins

fascinated reading the  
                                     watkins tin  
 pinhead print tells how  
     to make an ointment  
     ball the size of a pea  
     wrap it in  
                     gauze  
                     and  
                     swallow it.

(could the greasy pellet streaking  
 down your gullet  
 heal in passing  
 or  
 did it sit  
 in a pit  
     down there  
     giving off  
     beneficial fumes?)

we know, then  
 that followed nights  
 of dark, itching fire  
     (insane, trying to blow  
         downwards  
         some cool  
                     breath  
         for the  
                     suffering neck)

pain drawn like a bow  
 across the cords of her throat



and mornings  
when came

the stripping:

she stood with eyes closed  
swaying on her feet a  
little feverish

to receive the cold, sweet shock  
of air  
on her throat

(raw, sticky skin)  
making the throat *inside* scraped  
the *sore* throat  
feel like a tube of  
porcelain

-again, a whole instrument



come closer  
    here  
lift your arms  
open the robe  
and give us your breast stones  
and the pectoral gems  
that dazzle men

these also  
she loses

take the maiden  
uncover her heart





in the fifth year she comes to the fifth door.

the gatekeeper at the fifth door is herself,  
leaning easily against the stones, smiling a little.

here she realizes she has always been the gatekeeper

the gatekeeper takes the golden ring  
she does not ask "why do you do this?"  
she says "i feel that i hold a key in my hand"

this was in the fifth year at the fifth gate



*by this gate art thou measured*

-Ezra Pound,  
"Canto XLVII"

at this last

the robe falls  
to her feet  
                  a stiff heap  
flesh meets water  
                  at the edge  
is no turning

step down lady:  
this is the pool.

1.

in the middle of a burnt lake  
we sit  
and discuss the advantages  
of imprecise vision

faces float  
                  serious  
in the steam  
there is hope in this pool  
there is talk of spirit river



2.

out of this element  
between water and air  
looms the face  
looms the face  
of the drowned man  
a dark planet  
                    in the vapour

clouds move toward us  
lowering  
like huge dark hands  
there is hope in this pool  
there is talk of no name creek





3.

one eye opens  
its dark breathing cell  
looms calm and speckled  
                                in the steam  
                                in the face of the stranger

an eye  
upon which all eyes are focused

there is hope in this pool







from a hymn to the worm

8.

there is a powder  
licked from a blade  
makes molars firm  
                                in sockets, enamelled  
the jaw a studded strut  
hung by a muscle



from a hymn to the worm

9.

all things created  
canals created the marsh  
the marsh created  
a toothache-making worm  
he who went weeping  
tears  
    flowing before Ea:

*i starve in this bowl of dust  
give me to eat  
give me to drink  
that i do not wither  
like a piece of dry grass*

*the apricot is yours, worm  
the ripe fig*

*pah! what are fruits to me Ea?  
lift me up  
for my sucking  
lift me to dwell among teeth  
and gums  
in that cave i will suck blood  
from a white tooth  
there i will gnaw at gums  
and feed upon roots*





from a hymn to the worm

10.

the illuminated chart  
crabbed with cavities  
crude brown slashes  
in enamel  
          enamel

there is nothing like a root here



## IV

*You have gone.  
So what?  
You have stayed.  
So what?  
You have stood.  
So what?  
You have returned.  
So what?*

-Akkadian proverb



if you feel happy then

go as you

are you feel

happy if you

are and you

are happy if you

go as you feel you

are

if you feel like smilin and

feel happy as you

are laughin then

you feel as you

go you are happy if

you feel you can

go as you

are





*and the forests will echo with laughter  
and it makes me wonder*

-Led Zeppelin,  
"Stairway to Heaven"

in the rainbow gardens  
is the joy of totems

eyes swirling  
dark circles in wood

flowers  
    dive  
frilled heads first  
into the earth  
yellow roots kicking -  
the soil shakes hugely with laughter

these gardens hum  
there is the inner jazzline of roosters,  
combs  
    blasting off like cherry bombs  
happy with  
music and  
    being headless

the totems are welcome in our gardens  
the lady hears wind  
                    whistling through headholes  
mad toothless heads  
open      laughing      in forests      alone



my vagina is fine  
yet it is said  
    among my people  
that it is useless for me

-Akkadian proverb

once the lining was fresh  
now it's withered and dead  
the walls of my uterus  
no longer are red

alas! it has happened  
the thing i most feared  
my sweet breasts have dwindled  
i'm growing a beard

oh who will pry open  
the closed gates of horn  
and dig out this monster  
who will not be born?



dat ole debbil worm

who dat dancin  
wid dat  
    ole debbil worm?

dat da she-god

what she want  
wid dat  
    ole debbil worm?

she gon shake im loose

shake im loose

shake im loose



to tell the truth

about inanna  
scholars say

inanna was ambitious  
and aggressive

inanna was determined  
to become  
mistress  
of the underworld

inanna had a  
long-standing reputation  
for deceit

it is true  
her name has no  
red-flannel reliability  
if gary moore  
brush-cut and bow-tied  
shouted

Will The Real Inanna Please Stand Up?

i don't know if she would

but scholars  
they have the breath of fishes





you think this is some  
kind of joke  
a worm  
and a garden?



## V

*ashes ashes ashes  
into the tomb the great queen falls*



demeter kore demeter kore demeter kore  
demeter kore demeter kore demeter kore  
kore demeter kore demeter kore demeter  
kore demeter kore demeter kore demeter  
demeter kore demeter kore demeter kore  
kore demeter kore demeter kore demeter



i speak to you  
 as the eldest daughter of Sin  
 i am the goddess  
 who has the key  
 who is second to  
 no one of the gods

my sister straddles  
                   the throne of hell  
   naked  
 she must have her husbands  
 her children  
 the Bearing One  
 in her are all the motherwombs assembled

no sheet covers her well-kissed breasts  
 naked  
           as a pitcher

                  'my entrails, o my entrails'  
                   this sister moans

i have seen her lips caress  
 the cold skinny prick  
 of death  
 this one





in the rainbow gardens  
the two queens meet

naked inanna  
                    falls to her knees  
in the dust  
with swollen tongue and throat  
too dry to speak

the bearing one enters  
                    squats on her seat  
legs opened  
dimly red and shining  
in the darkness

in these halls of dust  
is no stirring  
no striving  
all time waits  
                    for the Death  
                    and the Birth

this is the hour  
this is the hour of eternity



in the mind  
death is organic  
we are constantly informed  
of its presence  
    the faint shadow in a mirror  
    a breath, swift indrawn  
a photograph:  
    the hand reaching  
        out

in the eye  
it waits, darkly shining  
the eye holds only stillness  
gazes neither in front  
    nor behind  
returns its own glance  
  
and again, the same

death sings  
death sings tonight in pulsing genitals  
death dances  
death dances in your lover's face  
death laughs  
death laughs in our ears as we sleep







naked the goddess kneels to receive her death  
 all eyes become fastened upon her  
 the eyes of death

seven judges utter the word  
 which tortures the imperfect spirit  
     howls in headholes  
     like a sick animal

the queen of heaven sickens  
     *for her they built the house of the heart*  
 the queen of heaven sickens  
     *for hers was the power to destroy the indestructible*  
 the queen of heaven sickens  
     *for in her was all healing found*

nowa danca deatha  
 nowa danca deatha  
 nowa danca deatha  
 nowadeath  
 nowadeath  
 nowadeath  
 nowadeath

*her body was a corpse  
     that hung  
     on a spike*

birth cries echo in the rainbow gardens





## VI

*What is above  
is below*



august

in this hottest month  
 of purification  
 i address you  
 i

the Lady of the Wilderness  
 the Lady of Desolation  
 the Lady of All Eventualities

i have lived six weeks  
 in the edin  
     the valley of bones  
 hungered and thirsted  
 and dust and clay  
 have been my food

no man or woman has come to me  
 and i have gone to no woman or man

i have seen the worm  
 he has come to me  
 in the dry heat of day  
 and at night, in dreams  
 his seven elements have tried  
 to suck  
     the last warm breath  
     from my chest

i have seen in my cup  
 a fear of damnation  
 a fear of the one word spoken  
                             the name



in the room

1.

in this room  
i am dead  
you are dead

2.

in the spring  
i get on a plane  
and travel to a warm climate  
i lie on a beach  
i visit a prison  
i ride buses  
when i return  
i carry a lighter suitcase  
and leave it, still packed, by the bed

3.

in the summer  
you take to the road  
and stay with friends, converts, family  
you play cards  
you drink tequila in the desert  
you sell leather belts  
when you return  
you carry a bunch of sagebrush  
and leave it in a bucket outside the door



4.

in this room  
you are dead  
i am dead

i leave this room  
i am alive

you stay in the room





milk fever

*you're right it's  
 no good to cry over spilled milk  
 but only a fool  
 wouldn't change milkmen*

-Marylou Dietz

you have not tasted milk  
 from an animal  
 only from waxed cardboard, glass, plastic  
 milk from an animal  
 might taste raw, dirty, genital  
 might be buzzing with microbes  
 which your pale  
                                 soft stomach  
 wouldn't know what to do with

when all the containers are broken  
 you will have to lick  
 your milk  
 off the floor  
                                 as it drips from the table  
 you drink a lot of milk  
 it will take a long time  
 to get enough  
 the milk mixed with hairs and crumbs  
 will sicken your tongue  
 make your throat convulse

you could lap milk  
 from cupped hands  
 but it would be animal, sweat and dirt

a woman's nipple  
 warm and alive in your mouth  
 is out of the question.



what are we going to do  
about you  
and your milk?



death comes calling

we watch television  
we watch a documentary  
about a tribe  
    of leftover mayans

against trees  
the men lounge in shapeless dresses  
puffing big cigars  
they are  
    all beautiful  
the women mash corn in a trough  
it will ferment  
the men and women will drink the mash  
at their corn ceremony  
they have  
    rituals  
for all the seasons

we have  
the blue glow  
in this cold room  
it is all  
the motion  
we have

you leave the room  
and start screaming  
i watch you on the floor  
you lie on your back  
    shivering  
you tell me you think you are  
    dying

your death comes calling  
the lacondones smile shyly  
at the camera  
a voice tells us  
there are approximately three hundred lacondones still in existence



i cover you with a blanket  
later i will tell you  
that i see your death  
every day

i cannot comfort





tonight  
the air spiced  
with the sin-sweet smell  
    of the evening mushroom  
the worm and i  
will suffer  
a parting of ways

i will put him from me  
i will raise the dead  
i will raise the dead

    eating and alive

        so the dead

            outnumber the living



She is coming

Inanna is coming from the pit!

hellwise the spiky demons scurried  
from out of the dry land

where hearth is barren  
where sky threatens  
where milk-churns  
jiggle no longer  
in our laps  
and milk sours  
where coyote stalks the lamb  
where seed lies scattered  
on dry ground  
where river and stream run fouled

scurried like bats  
through sunless halls of the dead

She is coming

Inanna is coming from the pit!

*eat not*  
*from the fields of the dead*  
*drink not*  
*the water of death*  
they asked for the corpse  
hanging on a spike  
sixty times scattered  
the food of life  
the living water  
Inanna stood up alive  
out of the dust and

She is coming

Inanna is coming from the pit!



## VII

*from the chapter  
of the coming forth  
by day*



one cool wet morning  
you will meet  
The Lady  
who comes Forth  
                    out of Darkness

standing beside the river  
you will look up  
and see  
The Eater of the Dead

perhaps you will walk  
in early summer  
with  
The Shining One

give it to her  
give it up  
                    to her

give it to her  
give it up  
                    to her





when the wild bull comes to her  
he comes with a chant  
a chant to move her heart



from a love-song to the lord of light

1.

last night  
as i  
the queen  
was shining bright

last night  
as i the queen of heaven  
was shining bright

as i was shining bright  
as i was dancing alone  
as i uttered a song  
to the coming  
night

he came to me  
the lord  
he heard my song

he came to me  
the lord of light  
he heard my song



from a love-song to the lord of light

2.

the night bird sings a wild note  
 as i  
     gaze upon him  
 as i  
     caress the lord  
 his hand he puts  
                     on my hand  
 as i  
     rejoice in him  
 his heart he puts  
                     next to my heart  
 as i  
     give life to him  
 his song brings deep joy  
                     in the night

i will drink with him the fresh milk  
                                     the sweet cream  
 i will watch over his house of life



from a hymn of the goddess to herself

it is a bright new crescent  
it is a hillock for me  
          high and wide in the plain  
it is a fallow field  
          where the uz-bird pipes with longing  
it is wet ground, soft and rich

who will plow it for me?

lady, the king will plow it for you  
he lies waiting at your side  
the king will plow it for you

plow it for me, my love





she craves the bed of the singing heart  
she craves the bed  
she craves the bed of the sweet lap  
she craves the bed

by his sweet, by his sweet bed  
by his honey bed of the rejoicing heart  
by his honey bed  
by his sweet bed of the honey lap  
by his sweet bed

he covers it for her  
covers the bed for her  
he covers it for her  
covers the bed for her



from a love-song to the lord of light

in the hot sun  
 he meets me  
 and we rejoice together  
 in his honey bed

his green gaze waters the plain  
 he is a sprouting garden  
 he is the honey-man  
           the honey-man  
                   of the gods  
 favoured  
                   of my womb  
 whose lips are honey  
 whose hands and  
           limbs and cheeks  
 are sweet  
           honey  
 he sweetens me ever

he prepares a sweet, fruitful couch  
 in the midst  
                   of the house  
 my sweetener  
                   of the navel  
 he is sweet lettuce  
 my wild bull  
                   of the fair thighs

his green gaze waters the plain  
 he is a tall leafing tree  
 he is the honey-man  
           the honey-man  
                   of the gods  
 sweet lettuce  
                   of my heart  
 his is the honey  
                   of my mouth  
 the sweet juice  
                   of my holy lap  
 he sweetens me ever



In me  
find the Mother

I awake and  
stand up  
          shining!  
You have gathered my flesh together

My left side  
is joined to my right side  
and my hands hold high  
the reedshoots

I am covered  
with my  
          womanly beauty  
I have the wings and feet  
of a bird

I am praised and  
come forth  
          loved!  
You have given me my heart again



from the many tales  
of her splendour  
her great triumphs  
her healing hands  
she has selected these:





## Afterword

The tablets and fragments which provide the text of the goddess Inanna's journey to the underworld were excavated at Nippur and at Ur. They were inscribed in the first half of the second millenium B.C. The date of their composition is unknown; but because Sumerian literature goes back to the middle of the third millenium B.C., most scholars estimate the composition date to be somewhat earlier than the date of inscription. For translations of the texts, I have relied primarily on Sandars and Kramer, and have compared their versions with others taken from texts listed in the bibliography and from the translations of the Ur tablets in the Sumero-Akkadian Collection, British Museum. Following is a brief summary of the main events of the myth.

Inanna, Queen of Heaven and goddess of the fertile earth, decides to visit the underworld. Though some scholars hypothesize about her motives, nowhere do the texts indicate a reason for her journey; in this she differs from the hero figures - Ishtar, Odysseus, Heracles, Orpheus and others - who succeeded her. Her journey takes place in summer, in the dry season of purification, when water is scarce. Before she leaves the earth she garbs herself in her divine garments and 'powers', and instructs her minister Ninshubar to mourn for her and plead with the great gods to save her life if she has



not returned within three days. When she reaches the outer door of the underworld, she commits a sin by lying to the gatekeeper about the reason for her visit; she says she has come to attend last rites for her brother-in-law. The gatekeeper consults with his mistress and is given permission to allow Inanna to enter. She must pass through seven gates, and at each one a garment is removed, until she enters the halls of the dead, naked.

The Sumerian conception of hell is difficult to envisage. The gate of hell is a gaping monster, the jambs are 'a sharp knife to slash down wicked men'. The *Edin* is a place where one can drown in dust - a desert, a Death Valley. Yet in hell also lie 'the rainbow gardens of the Lady' which Sandars compares to Virgil's asphodel meadow, a place for the refreshment of the dead. Kramer asserts that 'the very idea of paradise (as a garden of the gods) is Sumerian'.

In hell Inanna meets her sister, Ereshkigal, who reigns as Queen of the Underworld and sits naked on her throne. The *Annunaki*, the seven judges of hell, fasten the eye of death upon Inanna and she sickens and dies; her body is hung on a spike.

Meanwhile, Ninshubar does his duty and implores various gods to save his mistress. Each of them answers that she is insatiable and must suffer the fate she has brought



upon herself. But Enki, the water god, is grieved, and so fashions the *Kugarru* and the *Kalaturru*; to these two sexless creatures he gives the food and water of life and instructions to scatter these libations upon the goddess' corpse. They travel to the underworld and revive her. As she is leaving hell the *Annunaki* remind her that she must leave another in her place, for no one ever left hell without paying a price.

Inanna now ascends from the pit with the devils of the underworld fastened to her, walking with her. She travels from city to city in Sumer. On the way the party encounters various subjects of the goddess whom the devils want to abduct to hell as hostages. But Inanna refuses to let them be taken. Finally they meet Dumuzi, the shepherd-husband of Inanna, who neither makes obeisance to her or appears to be in mourning as he sits high on his throne. And upon him she fastens the eye of death. Sandars' translation concludes 'This was how holy Inanna gave up her shepherd into the power of the devils'.





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